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THE SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE AND SECURITY

Report of the Secretary-General

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to paragraph 22 of General Assembly resolution 53/203 A of 18 December 1998, in which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to report every three months during its fifty-third session on the progress of the United Nations Special Mission to Afghanistan. The present report, which covers developments since the issuance of the report of the Secretary-General of 23 November 1998 (A/53/695-S/1998/1109), is also submitted in response to requests by the Security Council for regular information on the main developments in Afghanistan.

II. RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN AFGHANISTAN

A. Political developments

2. The Mission held discussions with the respective leaders of the Taliban and the United Front in late January and early February which indicated a willingness by both sides to meet in face-to-face talks on the sole condition that they were under the auspices of the United Nations. The "ground rules" agreed upon by the two sides were: no fixed agenda, no substantive preconditions and no publicity. A meeting along these lines was held in Ashkabad on 10 and 11 February. The Taliban side was led by their Deputy Foreign Minister, Abdul Karim Zahid, and the United Front by Professor Abdul Karim Hashemi, Deputy Minister of Planning in President Burhanuddin Rabbani's Government. The talks were held in privacy in a frank and mutually respectful manner. The two sides agreed in principle that there should be more talks leading to agreement on a ceasefire, on prisoner exchange and on future discussion of the nature of the Government.

3. A second round of intra-Afghan talks took place in Ashkabad from 11 to 14 March under the auspices of the Mission. The two warring sides were represented at a level higher than at the first round. Mullah Wakil Ahmad Mutawakil, a close aide to the Taliban supreme leader Mullah Mohammad Omar, headed the Taliban delegation, while the United Front side was chaired by Mohammad Yonus Qanooni, Deputy Defence Minister in the Rabbani Government. As during the first Ashkabad round, the talks were not meant to produce any written agreement.

4. Nevertheless, the three-day talks were a positive development and could be a first step towards reaching a negotiated solution of the Afghan crisis. At the end of the three-day meeting, both sides reached an agreement in principle to form a shared executive, a shared legislature and a shared judiciary. They agreed to continue these talks with a view to addressing other issues and to implementing the decisions reached in Ashkabad. It is the intention of both sides to hold such a next round of talks preferably inside Afghanistan as soon as is practicable at a mutually agreed venue. During the second round of talks in Ashkabad, the Taliban and the United Front also concurred that each side would release 20 prisoners of war; the release would be facilitated by the International Committee of the Red Cross.

5. Prior to the two meetings in Ashkabad, the United Front held a series of meetings with the aim of consolidating the anti-Taliban forces, politically and militarily, under a single, unified command. The first of these meetings was held on 5 December 1998 in the Panjshir Valley, lasting three days. The meeting sought to form a Leadership Council in order to discuss ways of uniting all anti-Taliban groups under a unified high command led by Commander Ahmad Shah Massoud. A further meeting was held in Taloqan on 24 January 1999, at which, it is said, a Supreme Military Council was established, consisting of the fighting forces of Commander Massoud (Jamiat-e-Islami), the former Mujaheddin factions of the Shiite party Hezb-e-Wahdat, as well as those of Hezb-e-Islami (Hekmatyar) and Ittehad-e-Islami. The Supreme Military Council, led by Commander Massoud, agreed to escalate its military activities simultaneously on the northern and eastern fronts. A third meeting was held by the United Front in late February in Jabal-u-Seraj in Parwan Province. The meeting was attended by President Burhanuddin Rabbani as well as other key United Front leaders, including Commander Massoud, Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, the leader of the Ittehad-e-Islami, Wahidullah Sabawoon, an aide to Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and Haji Abdul Qadir, former governor of Nangarhar Province, as well as representatives of Jumbesh-i-Milli, headed by General Rashid Dostum, Harakat-e-Enqelab-e-Islami, headed by Asef Mohseni and Hezb-e-Wahdat, headed by Karim Khalili.

6. On 3 March, the United Front announced that it was in the process of forming a 40-member Leadership Council headed by Professor Rabbani. Professor Rabbani said that the Council's composition would be 12 Pushtoons, 10 Tajiks, 8 Hazaras and 10 members from smaller ethnic groups. He also announced a decision to create a 150-member Shura in the non-Taliban areas.

7. The Taliban have sought to consolidate their rule over the territory they hold. They say that they have broadened the base of their administration to incorporate greater representation from all ethnic groups, particularly

non-Pushtoons. They also say that there are now at least 11 non-Pushtoon ministers and provincial governors.

B. Military situation

8. A relative calm has prevailed on the battlefield during the winter. For the most part, fighting since the beginning of 1999 appears to be restricted to isolated hit-and-run attacks in the central and north-western regions, with little or no activity around the main front lines, apart from the area north of Kabul.

9. Fighting escalated in the second week of December in the northern provinces of Kunduz and Baghlan and in the region to the north of Kabul. Kabul was subjected to heavy rocket attacks from anti-Taliban forces on 11 and 12 December, resulting in 21 fatalities and 27 injured as well as extensive damage to property. There were also isolated outbreaks of fighting in the north-western provinces of Jowzjan and Faryab.

10. Fighting subsided considerably after the start of Ramadan on 20 December, with the exception of an area to the north of the Salang tunnel, where anti-Taliban forces captured territory west of Anderab district, and the entire Shinjan district. After the end of Ramadan, fighting resumed only in Jowzjan, Faryab and Bamyan provinces, where a series of hit-and-run attacks were carried out, as were some sporadic artillery duels along the frontline north of Kabul. In late February, the United Front forces claimed to have captured the central town of Yakolang, 100 kilometres west of the provincial capital Bamyan. They also claimed to have engaged Taliban forces in the mountain pass of Dara-e-Suf in Samangan Province, and in Daulat-Shah district in Laghman Province.

11. Both sides are believed to have received significant resupply of war matériel throughout the winter. There are reliable reports of major deliveries to both sides from and through countries in the region. Recruitment of fresh soldiers is also taking place on both sides, although there is reportedly growing reluctance on the part of the common people, especially in Taliban areas, to allow their youth to sign up.

C. Taliban relations with countries in the region

12. During the reporting period, there were increased contacts between the Taliban and Afghanistan's neighbouring States. For the first time, Taliban and Iranian officials met publicly at senior level in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, on 2 February: Ibrahim Taherian for the Iranian side and Mullah Wakil Ahmad for the Taliban. The two sides discussed ways to resolve their outstanding differences over the killings of eight Iranian diplomats and a journalist in Mazar-e-Sharif during the Taliban capture of the city in August 1998 as well as ways to improve Taliban/Iranian relations. Prior to the Dubai meeting, the Taliban had returned to the Islamic Republic of Iran the remaining Iranian lorries that they had impounded and released the remaining Iranian prisoners held in Kandahar.

13. The Taliban's contacts with the Central Asian nations also improved. The foreign ministers of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan have recently visited Islamabad, where they met with Taliban representatives. On 3 March, the Foreign Minister of Turkmenistan also visited Afghanistan, where he met the Taliban leader Mullah Omar in Kandahar and, later the same day, with Commander Massoud in Dushanbe.

14. The Taliban widened their range of contact with foreign countries and welcomed to Kabul and Kandahar a steady flow of official visitors, including delegations from China and Japan during February and March. Taliban representatives also met in Islamabad with senior foreign visitors, for example a United States Assistant Secretary of State and a British Foreign Office Minister. They also met with other diplomats in Islamabad in what is becoming a routine manner.

III. ACTIVITIES OF THE MISSION

15. On 21 December 1998, James Ngobi completed his assignment as acting Head of the Mission and was succeeded by Andrew Tesoriere, who was appointed Officer-in-Charge. Lakhdar Brahimi continues to serve as my Special Envoy for Afghanistan, while also carrying out other functions for the United Nations at my request from time to time. Together with the Department of Political Affairs, he continues to oversee and guide the activities of the Mission, including its coordination and cooperation with humanitarian and other United Nations activities in Afghanistan.

16. The focus of the Mission's activities in the reporting period was to assist the visits of my Special Envoy to the region as well as to facilitate face-to-face talks between the two belligerent parties. The Mission took the initiative to hold extensive and detailed discussions with both leaderships in late January/early February, which led to the talks described in paragraphs 2 to 4 above.

17. Keeping not only Afghanistan's immediate political future but also the longer-term political future in view, the Mission has maintained and worked to expand its contacts within the Afghan political community and with interlocutors in neighbouring countries. To this end, the Mission continued its visits to the Pakistani towns of Peshawar and Quetta, where there are large Afghan resident communities. The Mission intervened with the central and local authorities of Pakistan to appeal for their support in upholding the rights of Afghan expatriates to security and to education.

18. The Mission coordinated with the United Nations resident and humanitarian coordinator for Afghanistan in trying to resolve the outstanding security issues concerning the possible return of United Nations international staff to Afghanistan and the resumption of normal United Nations programme activities. In this connection, the acting head of the Mission accompanied the United Nations Coordinator to Kandahar on 17 February for talks with Taliban leaders. A member of the Mission participated in the United Nations technical security mission to Kabul from 4 to 8 February. For its part, the Mission took up directly with the Taliban leadership in Kandahar on 25 January and 17 February

the concerns of the United Nations and the international community regarding the terrorist activities and inflammatory public pronouncements of Osama bin Laden and certain other foreign "guests" of the Taliban movement.

19. In furtherance of the strategic framework for Afghanistan, the Mission has given special attention to strengthening its working relationship with United Nations humanitarian agencies and the donor community, keeping in regular contact with the chair of the Afghanistan Support Group (currently Sweden) and the non-governmental organization coordinating body, the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief. The Mission has participated in meetings of the coordinating advisory group, the Afghanistan Programming Body. The Mission has also made a practice of inviting the resident and humanitarian coordinator or his representative to the Mission's political briefings given to groupings that follow Afghanistan affairs closely, notably the "six plus two" group, the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and the European Union.

20. Plans are being made for the establishment of the civil affairs unit within the Mission as approved by the General Assembly. In this connection, an assessment mission will visit Afghanistan and the region in April.

IV. MY SPECIAL ENVOY AND ACTIVITIES AT UNITED NATIONS HEADQUARTERS

21. During the period under review, my Special Envoy for Afghanistan, Lakhdar Brahimi, undertook two missions to the region. In December 1998, Mr. Brahimi visited the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan. In both countries, he met with high-level officials and consulted with Afghan leaders.

22. In February 1999, my Special Envoy returned to the region. As of 22 March, he has visited Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Russian Federation, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, in this order. He also went to Kabul twice for talks with the Taliban leadership and met Commander Massoud in Dushanbe. In Islamabad, Peshawar and Tehran, he met several Afghan leaders and personalities, including Karim Khalili, the leader of Hezb-e-Wahdat and former President Mujaddidi. He also met representatives of various Afghan and international non-governmental organizations. Both in Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran, Afghans as well as non-governmental organization and United Nations personnel raised with Mr. Brahimi the growing difficulties faced by refugees, and he, in turn, discussed the issues with Pakistani and Iranian authorities.

23. In the capitals he visited, and during his talks with Afghan leaders and personalities, Mr. Brahimi pleaded for support for a peaceful settlement in Afghanistan. He asked also for closer cooperation between Afghanistan's neighbours, in particular through the six plus two informal group, so as to convey a clear, strong and unified message to this effect to all Afghan factions. In all these capitals, support for United Nations activities in Afghanistan was reaffirmed. Mr. Brahimi also stopped in Vienna to consult with the Executive Director of the United Nations International Drug Control Programme (UNDCP), Pino Arlacchi, on drug issues.

24. In Tehran, my Special Envoy met with Secretary-General Azzedine Laraki of OIC, who was there for talks with President Mohammed Khatami, who is the current Chairman of OIC. Mr. Laraki reaffirmed the commitment of OIC to cooperate with the United Nations in Afghanistan.

25. During the reporting period, the six plus two informal group, comprising China, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Pakistan, the Russian Federation, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, the United States and Uzbekistan, held an ambassadorial meeting on 14 January to discuss how best to proceed with the preparations for the proposed high-level meeting in Tashkent. Several working-level meetings have since been held in preparations for the proposed meeting.

V. HUMANITARIAN SITUATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS

A. Humanitarian situation

26. All United Nations international staff were withdrawn from Afghanistan in August 1998, following the killing of Lieutenant Colonel Carmine Calo (Italy), military adviser to the Mission. At the invitation of Taliban authorities, the United Nations Coordinator for Afghanistan visited Kandahar in January to discuss issues related to the security of United Nations staff and premises, and the return of United Nations international staff to Afghanistan. Subsequent discussions continued with Taliban representatives in Islamabad and, on 28 February, my Special Envoy and the Coordinator held discussions with the Taliban authorities in Kabul.

27. Following a technical assessment mission conducted in early February by senior United Nations security staff, a series of security assessment missions was undertaken in late February/early March to a number of duty stations in Afghanistan to determine the feasibility of re-establishing the presence of international staff. In Taliban-held areas, the authorities expressed a clear commitment to the security of United Nations staff and facilities. There was evidence of Taliban compliance with the provisions of the supplementary protocol on security, dated October 1998, between the Taliban authorities and the United Nations. On 12 March, it was decided that conditions permitted a limited and phased return of United Nations international staff to Afghanistan. During his second visit to Kabul on 21 March, Mr. Brahimi again stressed the security concerns of the United Nations and called for increasing Taliban vigilance in the face of reports that threats to the security of United Nations personnel might still exist.

28. In response to an earthquake measuring 5.5 on the Richter scale that struck Logar and Wardak provinces on 11 February, a joint relief effort was mounted by the International Committee of the Red Cross, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations. Casualties were low, and the most immediate needs were for temporary shelter, given the severity of the climate in the affected area. In addition to relief items supplied for some 18,000 affected families (including 200 metric tons of food for vulnerable households), support was provided to health facilities in the affected area to allow them to cope with the consequences of widespread homelessness.

29. On 13 February, an outbreak of an unidentified disease was reported in the remote district of Darwaz in Badakhshan Province, killing over 200 people, most of whom were children. The World Health Organization sent a specialized team from Geneva to investigate the disease. The preliminary conclusions were that the outbreak was an influenza-like epidemic with secondary bacterial complications causing high rates of pneumonia.

30. Despite the temporary withdrawal of international staff from Afghanistan, United Nations agencies and programmes continued their activities in Afghanistan. The World Health Organization maintained their regular health programmes and the United Nations Population Fund and the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat) also continued their programmes of support to the Afghan people. The Mine Action Programme for Afghanistan within the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance to Afghanistan was able to continue its operations throughout most of the country. Although the Taliban movement announced in October 1998 a ban on the production, transfer and sale of landmines, the extent to which new mines have been laid cannot yet be assessed.

31. It is estimated that Afghanistan produced up to one half of the world's opium in 1998. More than 63,000 hectares were farmed with poppy, yielding an estimated 2,100 metric tons of raw opium. Almost all opium poppy cultivation districts in Afghanistan are under the control of the Taliban. With regard to drug trafficking, it is recognized that conditions are currently not conducive to law enforcement in Afghanistan, though UNDCP continues to negotiate with the Taliban to ensure action against drug traffickers. As a result of persistent advocacy by UNDCP, some 34 heroin-processing laboratories were dismantled in Nangarhar Province by the Taliban, following a decree issued by Mullah Omar, leader of the Taliban movement.

32. During 1998, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) assisted the voluntary repatriation of some 107,000 Afghan refugees to Afghanistan, of whom 93,000 returned from Pakistan and 14,000 from the Islamic Republic of Iran. The UNHCR-assisted repatriation programme from Pakistan had been seriously disrupted and partly suspended in 1998 owing to serious funding constraints. An agreement with the Iranian authorities in late 1998 allowed UNHCR to facilitate the repatriation of 12,000 Afghans, most of whom were without refugee documents and permits to stay in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Returns from the Islamic Republic of Iran, among them many forcible returns, continued in early 1999.

33. In addition to its ongoing food aid activities in Afghanistan, the World Food Programme (WFP) and its non-governmental organization implementing partners assisted 160,000 vulnerable individuals in Hazarajat region with almost 4,000 tons of food aid. As of the end of February, WFP had managed to assist 21,000 vulnerable people in the remote Badakhshan Province with more than 900 tons of food aid. In early January, WFP resumed its bakery project in Jalalabad, benefiting 150,000 persons during the lean winter months. The Kabul bakeries, benefiting 264,000 people, also continued during the winter. WFP completed its baseline survey of food insecurity in Kabul and conducted similar surveys in Mazar, Jalalabad, Faizabad and the Wardak/Logar earthquake area. In Jalalabad,

WFP discovered that there had been a 33 per cent hike in the price of bread and wheat flour following the earlier closure of the WFP bakery project there.

B. Human rights

34. Human rights in Afghanistan remains a cause for serious concern. A particular problem is the status of women and girls, as their access to education, employment and an adequate level of health care remained severely restricted.

35. In December 1998, Kamal Hossain (Bangladesh) was appointed Special Rapporteur of the Commission on Human Rights on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan, replacing Choong-Hyun Paik. The Special Rapporteur carried out a mission to the area from 15 to 20 March 1999 with a view to finalizing his report to the Commission on Human Rights at its forthcoming fifty-fifth session. Visits by other thematic special rapporteurs of the Commission on Human Rights to Afghanistan are also envisaged in the course of 1999. My Special Envoy and the Mission have consulted with the newly appointed Special Rapporteur for Afghanistan.

36. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights engaged in fund-raising and preparations with a view to establishing a United Nations investigation team for Afghanistan, which will be deployed in the field as soon as security conditions on the ground permit. The investigation of alleged massacres and other gross violations of human rights and international humanitarian law in northern and central Afghanistan will be conducted under the auspices of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

37. A rights-based programme adviser has been seconded to the Office of the United Nations Coordinator.

VI. OBSERVATIONS

38. The onset of winter traditionally has led to a decrease in fighting in Afghanistan, as has occurred again this year. It should be expected, however, that both sides have used this traditional lull in military activity to replenish their respective arsenals in order to be in a position to resume the war. There also continues to be a danger of further regionalization of the Afghan civil war. Moreover, the humanitarian situation remains of serious concern to the international community.

39. I therefore welcome the recent discussions in Ashkabad, which indicate a willingness on both sides to move towards a peaceful solution. The understandings reached at the Ashkabad meetings must be followed by further agreements and it is my sincere hope that the two sides will soon meet again. It is imperative that steps finally be taken to end this long and tragic conflict. I strongly encourage the members of the six plus two group to lend their support to the United Nations efforts to achieve further progress in the intra-Afghan talks, while noting that, in 1998, the members of the six plus two group faced difficulties in developing a common and concerted approach. I

therefore hope that the latest developments, as represented by the recent Ashkabad talks, will facilitate a more unified approach by the six plus two in support of the United Nations-led peace efforts. I regard the initiative to hold a high-level six plus two meeting in the region as a very positive step.

40. The decision to move forward a phased and limited return of international United Nations personnel to Afghanistan will be closely monitored. This decision, which was not an easy one in view of reports about the continuing presence of Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan, does not signal a return to the status quo ante. The Taliban must fulfil the commitments they have made concerning the security of United Nations staff. In particular, I expect the Taliban authorities to finally complete their investigation into the murder of Lieutenant Colonel Calo. Unless there is clear evidence that all the commitments made by the Taliban regarding security have been carried out, I shall be compelled to review my decision about the return of international staff to Afghanistan. I should like to recall in this context that the personnel of the United Nations and the various non-governmental organizations present in Afghanistan are providing invaluable humanitarian assistance to the civilian population.

41. Before concluding, I would wish to pay special thanks and tribute to the helpful and constructive role played by the Government of Turkmenistan in providing the venue for the Ashkabad talks and for the support, material and moral, that they have so generously given. I also wish to acknowledge the tireless efforts of Mr. Brahimi, who undertook two missions as my Special Envoy to the region during the reporting period, as well as those of the Mission's staff, who played a key role in facilitating the resumption of intra-Afghan talks in Ashkabad.